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ABSTRACT

The Austin Independent School District's Research and Evaluation Office presents practical information concerning observational research. This paper focuses on five topics: (1) what makes a good observer (setting the ground rules, training observers in details, and practice, i.e., involving the observers in planning and providing rigorous training); (2) frequent teacher reactions encountered (hostility, apprehension, apathy) and suggestions for dealing with the reactions; (3) frequent student reactions encountered (curiosity, showing-off) and ways to deal with the situations; (4) school facilities or the lack of them and counteracting these problems by planning ahead; and (5) constructing observation instruments designed to answer specific questions, tailored to the age level of the student, and easy to use. A bibliography containing a number of reports dealing with observational findings is included. (PN)

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Practical Hints for Observational Research

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Practical Hints for Observational Research

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Over the course of the last six years, persons from Austin I.S.D.'s research and evaluation office spent over 6,900 hours observing approximately 1,100 elementary students from their first minute of school in the morning to their last minute in the afternoon. Our goals in doing this research have always been to collect reliable, useful data without unduly disrupting the behavior of the teachers and students who are observed. This paper is intended to share some practical expertise we have gained in doing such observational research.

This paper will focus on the following topics:

- What Makes a Good Observer?
- Frequent Teacher Reactions Encountered and How to Deal With Them
- Frequent Student Reactions Encountered and How to Deal With Them
- School Facilities (or the lack of Them!)
- Designing Observation Instruments

What Makes a Good Observer?

All observers who participated in this research have bachelor's degrees. They are not required to have teacher certification, but classroom experience is considered useful. A degree in a research-related field can also be quite helpful. It is most important to note, however, that observers (whether para-professionals or professionals) do a better job when given insight into the reasons and goals for the job, the expected outcomes of the project, the rules and regulations, and the opportunity for input. Training is also required to help observers in answering questions, behaving appropriately when in the schools, being consistent in coding schemes, reliability checks, etc. To sum it up, involving the observers in planning and providing rigorous training are helpful in insuring you have a good observer.

First Stage of Training: Setting the Ground Rules.

There are at least three stages of training that an observer will probably need before going out into the schools to do observations. First, some preliminary,

but crucial, concepts to review:

- What information can be shared with persons not conducting the research? If the hypotheses of the study are revealed to teachers or students, for example, it may affect their behavior in the classroom. Observers should be told what information they can share and what they cannot. Our typical answer is usually, "I am not sure I know what you are talking about, but I will take your question back to the office and give it to the proper supervisor." (Write down the question.) Observers should probably check back with their supervisor to see if he or she has found time to respond.
- Wear appropriate dress for the public schools. Men should wear casual slacks and shirt, dress pants or suits. No muscle shirts or faded blue jeans. Our male observers wore ties, even though they were not mandatory.

Females should wear a dress, skirt and blouse or tailored pants and blouse. They should not wear see-through blouses or blue jeans. We found pants to be more practical dress because of the small dimensions of the elementary schools' furniture.
- To ensure collection of reliable, useful data, observers must be able to understand the observation instrument and use it with ease and familiarity. They should spend as many hours as possible practicing with the instrument. We will discuss suggested practice techniques in later paragraphs.
- Observers should be aware that ethnic identification or sympathetic involvement with specific children can hinder efforts to collect reliable, useful data.

Second Stage - Training Observers in Details.

Based on schools' responses to The Observation Reaction Form¹ over a period of several years, the following rules have become staples of our training sessions:

- Know the route to the school at which you are scheduled for observation.
- Know the school's telephone number in case of an unforeseen delay or problem encountered enroute to the school.
- Record or memorize the names of the following people in the school in which you are scheduled to observe: principal, secretary, and teacher whose class you will observe in.

¹Observation Reaction Form contains three Likert scale items dealing with 1) convenience of the observation, 2) typicality of the observation day, and 3) obtrusiveness/nonobtrusiveness of the observer.

- If the school district furnishes identification badges to their employees, be sure to wear it.
- Checks into the school's office as soon as you enter the school. Explain the reason for being there and ask for directions to the classroom where the scheduled observation will occur, and to the teacher's lounge and restroom facilities.

Also ask the secretary if there are any ground rules governing the use of the school's lounge and parking lot. An observer should never abuse the privilege of using either one of the two areas mentioned above. If it is obvious that there is not enough room for the observer and the regular teachers to eat lunch during lunch period in the lounge, eat lunch in the car!

- Introduce yourself to the teacher if possible before the beginning of class. Find out when and where the class will be going for that day.
- Do not eat, drink or chew gum during an observation, nor use a noisy timepiece, such as a stop watch.
- Try to avoid leaving the room during an observation, unless it is unavoidable.
- Avoid entering into arguments with the teacher or any other staff member of the school.
- If a problem does arise when you are in the school, tell your supervisor about it as soon as you arrive back at the office. This will prepare him or her for handling any report the school might make. Also, this action fosters mutual trust and respect.

Third Stage - Practice!

We have found it useful to spend about six hours, three at each session, viewing videotapes of classroom instruction while coding our observation forms. Discussions following the sessions point out problems and allow for clarification.

The observers were then sent to do pilot observations in real classrooms for a few hours each day, for a total of six days. (These practice sessions, unlike the actual observations, were prearranged with the principal and teacher.) After each observation, the observers would meet with the supervisor in charge of their training and discuss any difficulties they had in using the form or making decisions.

Frequent Teacher Reactions Encountered and How to Deal With Them.

Once the observer begins actual observations, he or she can run into real problems in the form of teacher reaction to an observer in their classroom.

There are at least four teacher reactions that can occur:

- Hostility. This reaction usually occurs when the teacher has not been told of a possible visit by an outsider.
- Apprehension. Young teachers or teachers new to the district usually display the most concern toward an observer. Teachers who are concerned about their personnel evaluations and poor classroom managers also show a great deal of apprehension about outside visitors.
- Apathy. An attitude found in older teachers who are "marking time" until retirement, or who just are not aware of educational research.
- At Ease. Teachers exhibiting this type of reaction are usually very confident of themselves and their abilities. They are completely at ease with the observer, friendly and courteous.

With the exception of the last category, each of these attitudes can present problems for the observer. Here are a few strategies for dealing with them:

- Hostility. Explain to the teacher at the earliest possible time why you are there. Make it plain you are not there to observe them or pass judgement on their job performance. Apologize on behalf of whoever should have informed them that they might be observed.
- Apprehension. Listen to their concerns without letting them affect your objectivity. As with a hostile teacher, explain your reason for being in the teacher's classroom, but do not divulge information to him or her that you should not and again make it plain that in no way are you there to pass judgement on their job performance.
- Apathy. In cases of this nature, all one can do is listen and give noncommittal responses; do the observation without favoritism or prejudice.

Sometimes the atmosphere is so friendly and relaxed in the classroom, you may find yourself being drawn into a personal friendship with the teacher. Try to keep friendship and job responsibilities separate at all times.

Frequent Student Reactions Encountered and How to Deal With Them.

Students also react to the presence of an observer in their classroom. Most students are curious and want to know why the observer is in their classroom. Others are completely at ease and go about their business with a friendly nod of acknowledgement to the observer. The biggest problem occurs when you encounter a showoff!

It is important that observers be unobtrusive, if they are to collect valid information about students' normal activities; therefore, the best way to deal with any situation which may involve the students is to ask the teacher if he or she feels that the observer should be introduced to the whole class before classes begin.

Ignore students who show off. If their antics reach the point of interfering with your observation, quietly report the student to his/her teacher.

School Facilities or the Lack of Them.

School facilities often cause problems for the classroom observer. Such problems include the lack of: adult-sized furniture, a place to eat your lunch, a chair and space to sit in the classroom, and finally, a parking space in the school's parking lot. Plan ahead! Although it is often not possible to change the conditions or facilities in which you will be observing, anticipation of the problem that might be encountered can be helpful.

Designing Observation Instruments.

Instruments used for observation should be:

- Tailored to the age level of the students. (It is pointless to have a code for "recess" for high school students, for example.)
- Designed to answer specific questions.
- Easy to use.

During our eight-year history of observations, we have designed three instruments. The first instrument was called the Pupil Activity Record (PAR). The PAR is a systematic observation instrument designed to answer—"What is the amount and kind of instruction provided to elementary students during the instructional day?" One student is observed for an entire school day to provide the inferential measure of the instruction delivered to all students. The instrument also requires an ongoing record of the instructional materials used by the student.

The variables observed with the PAR include the place of instruction, content area of instruction, mode of instruction, adult contact and the content of instruction. This form was printed on regular bond paper and the information for each minute was keypunched. (The entire procedure was quite costly.)

The second instrument was the Pupil Activity Record-Revised or PAR-R. In addition to PAR variables such as place and subject area of instruction, the PAR-R can be used to record variables such as ethnicity of a student and whether a substitute teacher was present in the classroom. This instrument was printed with "OPSCAN", a scannable coding form. (The cost per sheet was three cents in 1980-81).

The third and most recent observation instrument designed by our office is a somewhat simplified systematic observation instrument designed to answer—"What is the amount and type of instruction provided to kindergarten students during a school day?" Two students from a class can be observed simultaneously for each minute during the entire school day. The variables recorded include adult contact, amount of instruction, instructional grouping, group size and off-task behavior.

Originally, we used number two pencils for marking on the forms, but later switched to mechanical pencils with soft black lead. This eliminated constant pencil sharpening, and is still "scannable."

SUMMARY

We have used observations to gather a great deal of data about students in our school district. We have shared our data, observation instruments and method of operation with many other school districts.

A bibliography containing a number of reports whose findings were the results of observations has been included with this paper for your review.

REFERENCES

Most of these publications are available through ERIC. Those with AISD publication numbers may also be purchased for the cost of reproduction from:

Office of Research and Evaluation
Austin Independent School District
6100 Guadalupe
Austin, Texas 78752

1976-1977

Title I at Mid-Year: Interim Report. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.45

Preliminary PAR results are discussed for the fall of 1976-77 in this brochure.

*ESEA Title I Project 1976-77: Final Technical Report. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977 AISD Pub. No. 76.62

Technical reports on the PAR and the Classroom Observation Reaction Form are included.

ESEA Title I Program 1976-77: Final Evaluation Report. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.63

PAR results are discussed in terms of programmatic impact for Title I.

*State Compensatory Education 1976-77: Final Technical Report. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.60

Technical reports on the PAR and the Classroom Observation Reaction Form are included.

State Compensatory Education 1976-77: Final Evaluation Report. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.61

PAR results are discussed in terms of programmatic impact for SCT.

Title I Migrant Program 1976-77: Final Technical Report. Doss, D., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.58

Technical report on classroom observation is included.

Title I Migrant Program 1976-77: Final Evaluation Report, 1977. Doss, D., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.59

Implementation level for the Oral Language Development Component is discussed.

Directions for Using the Pupil Activities Record (PAR). Wilkinson, D. and Hester, J., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 76.73

Describes how to use the PAR.

1977-1978

*ESEA Title I Project 1977-78 Final Technical Report. Hester, J. and Matuszek, P., 1978, AISD Pub. No. 77.21

Technical reports on the PAR and the Classroom Observation Reaction Form are included.

Title I at the End of the Year 1976-77. Hester, J. and Matuszek, P., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 77.24

This brochure summarizes PAR findings for Title I students.

How Time is Used in Title I, A Sample of Non-Title I, and Sixth-Grade Schools. Hester, J. and Matuszek, P., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 77.13

This brochure summarizes PAR findings for Title I students.

*State Compensatory Education 1977-78 Technical Report. Totusek, P. and Matuszek, P., 1978, AISD Pub. No. 77.48

Technical reports on the PAR and the Classroom Observation Reaction Form are included.

Where Does the Time Go? A Study of Time Use in Public Schools. Hester, J. and Ligon, G., 1977, AISD Pub. No. 77.42

Use of the PAR to determine time use is discussed.

1977-78 Evaluation Findings Volume, 1978, AISD Pub. No. 77.59

Part IX. ESEA Title I
Part XII. State Compensatory Education

PAR results are discussed in terms of programmatic impact for these two projects.

Compensatory Programs Do Not Supplant, They Supplement, Right? Doss, D.A. and Hester, J., AERA, 1978, AISD Pub. No. 77.35

The question of whether instructional time is increased by compensatory programs is investigated.

1978-1979

Title I at the End of the Year 1977-78. Doss, D. and Ligon, G., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.14

This brochure summarizes PAR-R findings for Title I students.

*Manual for the Use of the Pupil Activities Record-Revised. Ligon, G., Doss, D., and Friedman, M., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.48

Describes how to use the PAR-R.

*ESEA Title I Project 1979: Final Technical Report. Doss, D. and Ligon, G., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.61

Technical reports on the PAR and PAR-R are included.

*1978-1979 Title I Migrant Technical Report. Friedman, M. and Ligon, G., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.51

A technical report on the PAR-R is included.

ESAA Pilot Written Composition Program 1978-79 Technical Report. Frye, T. and Ligon, G., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.62

A technical report on the PAR-R is included.

On Time - A Second Look. Haskin, C., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.41

This brochure summarizes results of observations for the 1976-1977 and 1977-1978 school years.

Increasing Instructional Time: Impact of a Time-Use Study. Ligon, G., Hester, J., and Pankratz, C., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.67

Changes in time allocation from one year to the next are analyzed in the context of the dissemination of the first year's results.

Your Students Might Be Spending Only Half of the School Day Receiving Instruction. Davidson, J. L., and Holley, F. M., March, 1979, American School Board Journal

The fact that only half of the school day is used for instruction is discussed.

Time: Today it Translates to Dollars. Holley, F. M. and Ligon, G. D., May-June, 1979, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

Expensive instructional time can be increased without the expenditure of funds.

Summary: What We Know About Time. Holley, F., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.83

This paper summarizes evaluation findings about time use in AISD elementary and secondary schools.

1978-79 Evaluation Findings Volume. 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.85

Part IX. ESEA Title I

Part X. ESEA Title I Migrant

Part XIV. ESAA Pilot Written Composition Program

PAR and PAR-R results are discussed in terms of programmatic impact for these three projects.

1979-1980

Title I at the End of 1978-79. Doss, D. and Curtis, J., 1979, AISD Pub. No. 78.27

This brochure summarizes PAR findings for Title I students.

The Influence of Instructional Setting on Student Task Orientation. Ligon, G., 1980

This dissertation investigated the amount of on-task and off-task behavior in groups of varying sizes and in the presence or absence of a teacher.

1980-1981

1980-81 Evaluation Findings Volume. 1981, AISD Pub. No. 80.32

IX. Systemwide Desegregation

X. Title I

PAR-R results are discussed in terms of programmatic impact for these two projects.

*ESAA/District Priorities—Systemwide Desegregation 1980-81 Final Technical Report. Berrier, H. and Carsrud, K., 1981, AISD Pub. No. 80.80

A technical report on the PAR-R is included.

*Final Technical Report: 1980-81 ESEA Title I Regular Program. Doss, D. and Ligon, G., 1981, AISD Pub. No. 80.71

A technical report on the PAR-R is included.

Information From ORE About Classroom Observations. Doss, D., and Ligon, G., 1981, AISD Pub. No. 80.27

This brochure informs school personnel about the nature of observations using the PAR-R.

Manual for the Pupil Activities Record for Principals 1 (PAR-P). Doss, D. and Jackson, E., 1980, AISD Pub. No. 80.46

Describes how to use the PAR-P , a simplified version of the PAR designed to help principals focus their classroom observations on time use.

Manual for the Pupil Activities Record for Principals 2 (PAR-P). Doss, D. and Jackson, E., 1981, AISD Pub. No. 80.47

Describes how to use the PAR-P , a simple version of the PAR for Principals.

Some Lessons We Have Learned from 6,500 Hours of Classroom Observation. Ligon, G. and Doss, D., 1981, AISD Pub. No. 81.56

1981-1982

ESEA Title I: 1981-82 Final Technical Report. Carsrud, Karen, AISD Pub. No. 81.33